GOING HOME
Luke 15:11-32
September 25, 1983

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

To return to the place of one's birth is not always a simple thing to do. Thomas Wolfe was right, of course. You can never go home fully in the sense of recapturing or reliving a past which is long gone, and there is something very sad, ultimately, about the effort. And yet, there is another sense in which Wolfe was wrong. You not only can go home, there is something about you that is authentically and genuinely you only in the context of that home. A New York newspaperman, reflecting on his annual trip to Iowa to visit his family's farm, writes: "We can never be - in the deepest sense - anybody than we always were from the beginning." Madeleine L'Engle notes in one of her journals her discovery that we are - at 40, or so, or 60 - not only that age, but all the ages we ever were. The child, the adolescent, the young adult is still in us.

One of the best motion pictures I've seen in a long time was about the experience of going home. Tender Mercies is a story of a man and a woman and a child - each a long way from home. The man is a broken down country singer who ends up drunk and alone in a room of a motel owned by the young woman whose husband was killed in the Vietnam war and her young son. The man stays to work off his debt. They fall in love, marry and slowly, through a series of powerful, but terribly common crises, healing happens to all of them. It is a story of great grace and behind it all, portrayed with remarkable and unusual respect, is the Baptist church where the woman sings in the choir. It is obviously her sustenance. When her husband and son are baptized one Sunday morning, the ride home in the pick-up truck is one of marvelously human joy. They are all literally going home - they are all healing and recovering that wholeness which had been lost in the far country of failure for him, grief for her, loneliness for the boy.

Going home - is a powerful and elemental human experience: from that time long ago when we came home to a joyful reunion after first being away, bursting with pride and anticipation, with a new baby, or home from college for the first time, to all these other times across the years when it has been necessary to go home, some less happy than others. It is a metaphor for something significant about all of us. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote: "The essential homelessness of the human spirit is the ground of all religion." (The Nature and Destiny of Man, p. 14) The Psalms of Exile, the music of slavery, celebrate home as place, and home as restoration of that which has been broken. "Swing low, sweet chariot: Comin for to carry me home," the Spiritual puts it.

Going home stories are good and engaging, and none is any better than the one which is found in the 15th chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke.

It's a going home story, but it's really about the persuasive, compelling power of a love that summons and enables the homecoming. It is, to use the happiest word in our vocabulary, a story about grace. The story has been going on, by the way, throughout the entire 15th chapter of Luke. Jesus has been accosted by people who were critical of the company he was keeping. He was seen consistently with undesirable riff raff: social outcasts, religious outsiders. His critics challenged him and in response he told a series of stories. They constitute what, for me, is the most important chapter in the Bible.

Who are we? We weary, at times, of the question. Why not just get on with life and forget about trying to define who we are. "I was never bothered by a lack of self identity," a professor of mine said once, "because no one ever told me I had a self to identify." I was talking with three bright young people one time about why they didn't participate in the youth group at their church. "Because all they do is sit around and have discussions about who they are," one answered, and her brother, to punctuate, added "If anyone else asks me who I really am I'm gonna be sick." (That one is now a Presbyterian minister!)

Yet our impatience with the abstraction notwithstanding, it is the question. Academecians know it and always have. The nature of humanity is the problem. Anthropology and theology are not so very distant. Granted, most of us don't pursue it abstractly, academically: nevertheless the answer to the question of who we are gets expressed in our mores, our institutions, our social policy, ultimately our government. Public education, the Franklin County Welfare system, the Mental Health facilities express our view of who we are.

Personally, it is expressed in the way we treat one another; the way we relate to spouses, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, enemies.

What is man? Who are we?" We are, at least, a puzzle, an enigma. We can produce an Albert Schweitzer and an Adolf Hitler, simultaneously. We construct bombers and cathedrals and destroy our cathedrals with our bombers. We invest in prisons and concert halls. We spend our money testing nerve gas and artificial hearts. Our technology is so precise we can sit in our homes and hear the Russian pilot, at 35,000 feet, closing on the 747, talking about firing the missile, but we don't know the words to say that will make him stop.

Who are we? There are two positions essentially. Call the first one the high view, the second, the low view. On the side of the high view put all the liberalizing, humanizing, idealizing, lofty visions of a humanity becoming more civilized with each generation, growing in statue to new heights of compassion and justice and goodness. The high view expressed itself in efforts to improve the human condition; to build more houses, and feed more people, and cure more diseases. It is us - at our best. It is the classic, the Renaissance view: in art - Michaelangelo's magnificent David, in literature Shakespeare:

"What a piece of work is man.
How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty.
In form and moving how express and admirable,
In action how like an angel.
In apprehension how like a God."

And one thinks of them - the Schweitzers, and the Mother Theresas, and the Martin Luther Kings, and the Pope Johns. And that is the weakness of the high view. The same humanity is expressed more modestly elsewhere and with great, great evil occasionally. Schweitzer and Hitler were contemporaries and countrymen, and while he doesn't necessarily define our humanity, Adolf Eichmann was one of us too.

And so, the low view: Freud said we are a product of deep, subconscious impulses, and though we learn how to behave appropriately, most of the time, it is all a charade essentially. And Karl Marx suggested that we are driven by an economic determinism, and the new biology is suggesting that we are a product of a genetic

The fundamental assertion of Christianity, however, is that God love us: God's love for us is not affected by how many rules we have kept or broken. Christianity has never said that there ought not to be rules. That has been tried - the name for it is anti-nomianism, and it has always been a disaster. All Christianity maintains is that there is no cause and effect relationship between the rules we keep and the love God has for us. Thus, if we choose to confess our failures, it isn't in order to persuade God to forgive us but precisely because God is so anxious to forgive, in fact has already forgiven us. Thus if we choose to be moral, it isn't to convince God to send us to heaven instead of hell, but precisely because God's love is so powerful, so incredible, we cannot bear to violate it.

Understandably, there has always been a tendency within Christianity to avoid the freedom of this grace and revert to the safer, more comfortable practices of religion. Capon writes: "...grace cannot prevail until...our lifelong certainty that someone is keeping score has run out of steam and collapsed...As long as you leave one...possible recourse to salvation by bookkeeping, our freedom-dreading hearts will clutch it to themselves." (op. cit., p. 7/8)

Christianity suggests that our relationship with God is initiated by God, made possible by God, provoked by God, carried by God, consumated by God. "To understand ourselves truly," Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "means to begin with a faith that we are understood from beyond ourselves, that we are known and loved of God." "Where can I flee from thy spirit?" the Psalmist wondered, knowing that there is no where, not hell itself, not the dark night of the soul, where any of us can evade the pursuing love of God. A modern pilgrim writes: "In a fundamental way I came to trust that God was for me and with me...It isnt' that we have faith in God, but that God believes in us...It is God's hold on us that is unbreakable." (Robert Raines, Going Home, p. 41)

It begins to sound as if religious faith itself is a gift of God: that our believing in God is not something we generate in our souls - but, again, a gift which we can accept or not accept. Our best thinkers, by the way, have come to that conclusion. Martin Luther, whose 500th birthday we are celebrating this year, taught that all was grace, that faith itself is given to us by God. God pursues us when we move away from him. And we do move away, all of us. We do travel to far countries. Like the younger son in the parable we take the inheritance: we accept our minds, our skills, our genetic structure, our strengths, as if we manufactured them ourselves. We take the resources of the created order - the air, water, food - as if we made them. We accept the love and support of dear people and in spite of everything we have been given - somehow conclude that we really are self-made. We move into far countries of egotism, concluding that we need no one, least of all God. Or we remain closer to home geographically, laboring hard and resenting every minute of it, feeling sorry for self, nurturing long standing angers and hurts, amusing ourselves by our own martyrdom.

And sometimes we flee from God in an endless round of busyness which never ceases and sometimes we flee from God in self-imposed despair described eloquently as the dark night of the soul.

Who are we? The Marxist answer is cogs in the larger gear, our purpose - to serve the state. The Fascist answer is - part of the folk, the people who exist to obey the leader. Our culture's answer seems to be - consumers, with needs manufactured by one segment of the economy called advertising, to be met by another segment of the economy called manufacturing.

The Christian word is that we are more than that. Niebuhr wrote: "Man does not know himself truly except as he knows himself confronted by God. Only in that confrontation does he become aware of his full statue...in him." (vol. II, p. 131)

To be human is to understand the significance of our insignificance. It is to look into the mystery of a starry sky and ask, in total wonder - "Who am I? In this incomprehensible universe; how is it that I am?" To confront God is to know the whole truth - our greatness and our smallness: our potential and our sin.

It is to expect much of humanity - including our own. It is to expect compassion and justice and integrity and to be unsatisfied with anything less. It is to expect much morally of humanity, including our own - and - it is to know that we will stumble, fall short, fail and that without forgiveness, grace, acceptance, human life in relationship is not possible.

Nowhere is the word about us clearer than in the one who is himself the Word of God, Jesus Christ. There is something about our humanity which is defined, by the fact that it has been visited by the divine. There is something about you - and me - which is revealed by the fact that Jesus the Christ was one of us. "Jesus is the revelation of our human life and not its proudest exception," a theologian puts it. (John Shea, The Challenge of Jesus, in E. Campbell's Notebook, vol. 3, no. 3)

Jesus is human life - yours - mine - as God means it to be. And Jesus is redeemer, the one whose life is the promise that God does not write us off when we fail to measure up. The deepest truth of all, almost inexpressible, is that in Jesus Christ, God covers human sinfulness, human failure, with love and creative power and new potential.

Who are we? We are part of the created order: men and women who live and move and have being by the divine rhythm of expectation and grace: men and women who can be at home with their humanity, at peace with who they are, yet always striving, reaching, expecting more of other people, themselves, the world: yet people who, when they fall short of those divine expectations, know themselves gloriously forgiven and accepted by God - which discovery empowers them to forgive self, to get up and try again.

That is who we are...saints who fall - sinners who are forgiven - which is to say - children of God; loved of God; accepted of God.

No wonder the Psalmist ended, as he began:

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth." Amen.